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J. L. Comaroff & J. Comaroff. *Ethnicity, Inc.*

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J. L. Comaroff & J. Comaroff. *Ethnicity, Inc.* University of Chicago Press. 2009. 236 pages.

Venture-capital outfits run by chiefs; tribal holding companies of precious metals; nations as brands and commercial enterprises; indigenous-themed casinos and shopping malls; amusement parks dedicated to warrior heroes; consultancies that advise clients on how to commodify identity; and culture as intellectual property and patent rights. With these examples in mind, it is obvious that ethnicity has become a new frontier in Late Capitalism. Whereas Marx emphasized the alienation of the commodity from its producer, the current practitioners of ethnic commerce are not an alienated proletariat, for their *ethnicity* in part constitutes the mode of production. Creating value and opportunities for consumption, corporations and entrepreneurs have brought the politics of ethnicity to the marketplace. Unsurprisingly, the result is a dialectic of finance and cultural capital: culture is commodified, and the commodity becomes culture. This process usually results in a mix of good and bad results for those “producing” the ethnic product, and often spectacular profits for outside investors.

The recent explosion in the commodification of ethnicity, assert John L. and Jean Comaroff in their 2009 book *Ethnicity, Inc.*, has largely been due to intellectual-property litigation and to a global consensus acknowledging the right of indigenous peoples to profit from their vernacular customs and products. The majority of these cultural producers, whom the Comaroffs call “ethno-preneurs,” do not believe that commercializing identity denigrates or reduces it to a simple article of trade. Rather, as echoed by a proponent of ethnic tourism in South Africa’s rural North West Province, “marketing what is ‘authentically Tswana’ is also a mode of reflection, of self-construction, of *producing* and *feeling* Tswana-ness” (italics in original; p. 9). In such an example, the distinction between performer and audience becomes ambiguous, for the producers of culture are also “consuming” embodied enactments of their own identity. In turn, these saleable representations of ethnicity frame people’s conceptions of cultural identity and belonging, such that many impoverished black Africans fear annihilation if they cannot successfully market something “unique”. In these cases, survival, the Comaroffs note, is a function of an ethnic group being “seen” by paying tourists.

In one alarming example (p. 10), the (white) proprietor of a safari park in South Africa's Western Cape invited San "Bushmen" to don "tribal" garb and sell their crafts to tourists.

The text's two most convincing manifestations of ethnicity-cum-economy come from Southern Africa, an area that the Comaroffs have studied for more than forty years. The first example concerns the indigenous peoples known collectively as the San or Bushmen and the *Hoodia gordonii* cactus, a plant taken as an appetite suppressant by San hunters in the Kalahari. Use of *Hoodia* came to the attention of the Apartheid government, who would hire the San as trackers for military excursions into Namibia and Angola. In 1977, a South African state research organization succeeded in isolating *Hoodia*'s active ingredient, known as P57, for which they received a patent in 1996. In yet another example of indigenous-property-turned-corporate-profit, the rights to P57 were sold to multinational pharmaceutical companies, which attempted to commercialize the compound into a blockbuster fat-fighting diet pill. Meanwhile, a South African attorney representing the San condemned publically this act of bio-piracy and promised to legally obtain reparations for the stolen *Hoodia*. While ultimately successful in securing a percentage of royalties from the sale of the substance, the loosely organized San groups were obliged to present themselves as a "people" (under the auspices of an NGO) in order to assert in court "their" right to *Hoodia* as intellectual property. This litigation, explain the Comaroffs, resulted in a "'thicker', ever more textured" sense of San identity and, with the proceeds of *Hoodia* sales at stake, efforts to "'out' ... in both senses of the term" Coloureds pretending to be San (p. 92).

Ethnicity, Inc.'s other persuasive example of this phenomenon analyzes the Bafokeng people of South Africa and the hazy boundary that exists between its nation (*morafe*) and multibillion-dollar "tribal" corporation. Blessed with one of the world's most concentrated deposits of precious metals, the Bafokeng Nation won a legal settlement in 1999 that guaranteed them a twenty-two percent royalty on all platinum extracted from their territory, as well as an ownership stake in the mining company Implats. By 2004, their initial equity stake of USD twelve million had quintupled in value to USD sixty-five million (p. 105). Flush with liquidity, the Bafokeng quickly acquired stakes in companies in the construction, finance, oil, smelting, agribusiness, and IT industries. Overseeing this bewildering array of business interests, worth an estimated USD 2.7 billion, is Royal Bafokeng Holdings, a Johannesburg-based "investment entity" akin to other global finance houses in all but one manner: its chairman also happens to be the hereditary "king" of the Royal Bafokeng Nation. As such, governance by the CEO king takes

the form of a corporate board meeting, with his Bafokeng subjects treated like shareholders. Ethnic capital finances the “advancement” of this nation, where officials are held accountable not by the public social good but by the motive of profit. As with the San and their *Hoodia* bonanza, the Bafokeng’s newfound wealth has helped to make its ethnicity “more tangible, more emotionally compelling” (p. 114), an endeavor that the Comaroffs believe partially serves to guard the nation’s ethnic periphery from outsiders, thus limiting the (re)distribution of their windfall earnings.

In these and other examples, however, there is a troubling aspect to the Comaroffs’ argument: their readiness to criticize what is often a marginalized people’s only source of sustenance. The tone of *Ethnicity, Inc.*, mocking at times, conveys an implicit value judgment. Unexplored in any detail is the fact that participating in the cultural economy has brought some Southern Africans real material benefits, in addition to providing a sense of pride in ethnic self-identification. Amidst dire poverty, widespread public apathy, and little wage labor, these outcomes can be positive for the participants, no matter how ambiguous or bizarre the means. Shouldn’t the San, and not simply multinational pharmaceutical companies, benefit from the sale of a product that they have traditionally used for non-commercial purposes? Likewise, who can blame the Bafokeng for using ethnicity to their advantage in the economy of the “new”, neoliberal South Africa? Shouldn’t the culprit in these cases be the system that entrusts welfare and development to the market and not the subaltern peoples who have “succeeded” (to varying degrees) in creating value from their vernacular lifeways? Though the Comaroffs ultimately refuse to judge ethnic commerce (p. 149), their neutrality is too tepid and comes too late.

Apart from being at times reproachful in their criticism, the Comaroffs succeeded in their wider objective of proposing a model of critical scholarship to examine the ethnic economy in all its dimensions. The widespread ability of commodified ethnicity to (re)shape identity, (re)vitalize group consciousness, and form new patterns of sociality explains its ubiquity and attests to its influence in contemporary society. The comprehensive scope of the Comaroffs’ approach provides a number of points of reference with which to scrutinize the marketplace of (re)producing cultural subjects and objects. In this regard, *Ethnicity, Inc.* is an important contribution to the conversation on ethnic identity in an age in which *life* itself has become mere “human capital”.

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